

Tim and the Hidden People

Tim and the Witches

Sheila K. McCullagh

Illustrated by Pat Cook



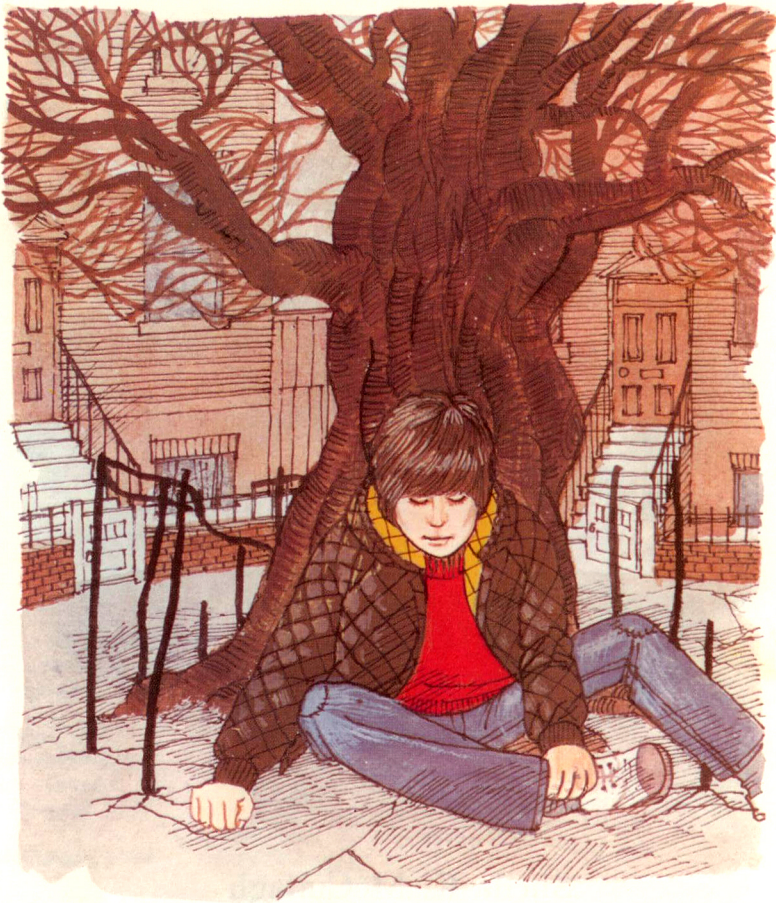
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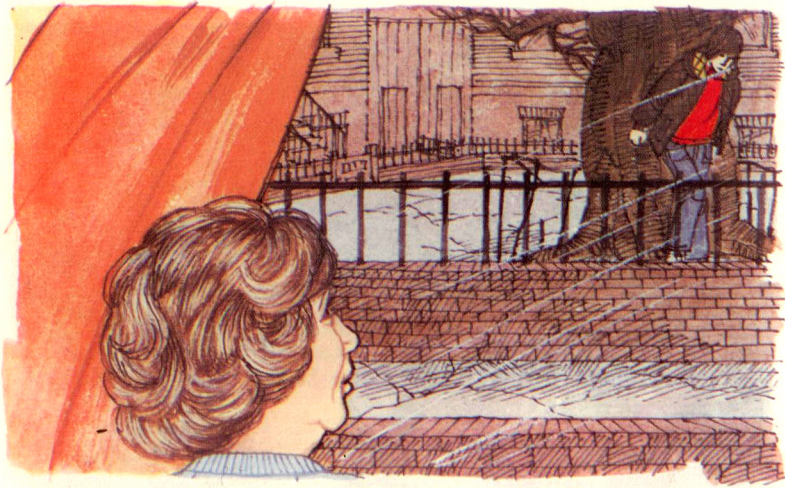
Nelson



It was a stormy day.

The old tree in the middle of The Yard creaked its branches in the wind.

Tim was climbing the tree, when he slipped and fell. He didn't fall very far, but he twisted his ankle, and when he stood up, it hurt.



Aunt May was in the kitchen. She looked out of the window, and saw him hopping across The Yard on one foot.

She came out to meet him.

“What have you done now?” she said.

“I fell,” said Tim.

“You were up that tree,” said Aunt May. “I told you not to climb that tree.”

She helped Tim down to the kitchen. He sat down and took off his shoe and his sock. Aunt May looked at his foot.

“You’d better rest it,” she said.

She put some cold water on it, and then tied it up for him with a white bandage.

She gave him his supper, and then sent him up to bed.



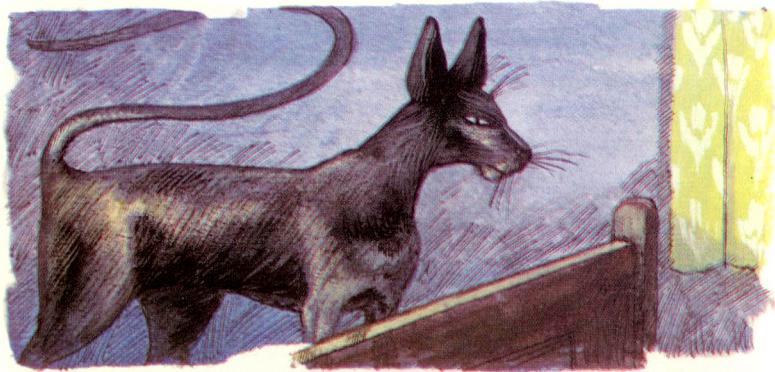
Tim went slowly upstairs on two hands and one foot, hopping from step to step.

He pushed the bedroom door open with his hand, pulled himself up, and clicked on the switch. Nothing happened.

Tim felt for the matches on the table by the door.

He struck a match and lit the candle.

Tobias was standing on the bed.



“We’re going out to the woods tonight,” Tobias said, as Tim hopped into the room. “What have you done to your foot?”

“Nothing much,” said Tim. “I twisted my ankle.”

“I know someone who can look after that,” said Tobias. “We’ll go and see her first. Blow the candle out. I’ve got a broomstick at the window.”

“Last time I went with you, you left me,” said Tim. “Will you bring me back if I come?”

Tobias said nothing for a moment, and Tim saw that he was angry. His tail twitched and his eyes went black.

“Don’t come if you don’t want to,” he said.

But Tim did want to go.

He blew out the candle, hopped over to the window, and looked out.



The wind was blowing the clouds across the sky. Tim hadn't felt the wind much, down in The Yard, but now it felt cold on his face, as it blew in at the open window. The curtains suddenly blew out into the room.

The light was fading. The first stars were coming out.

The broomstick was bobbing up and down in the wind outside, just as it had been on the night they went to the fair.



Tim turned and looked at Tobias.

Tobias was standing on the bed, staring at him. His eyes glowed. His tail was sticking up behind him.

“I’ll bring you back, Tim,” he said. “I’ll bring you back this time.”

Tobias jumped off the bed, ran to the window, and jumped up on the sill.

“Come on, Tim,” he said. “There’s a storm wind blowing.”

He jumped out of the window, on to the broomstick. Tim could see that he gripped it with very long, sharp claws.

Tim climbed slowly across the sill, and slid on to the broomstick. It was tossing up and down like a boat on the sea. He didn’t dare to look down. He felt the broomstick bob down under him, and then come up again. Tobias twitched his tail, and they set off.



They cleared the roofs, and turned into the wind. Tobias flew the broomstick along the canal, very high up over the dark water.

Tim looked down. Lights were coming on in the town below. They were flying so high now, that the town looked as if it were full of toy houses, with toy cars running up and down the streets. Farther off, the street lamps were beads of light, looking like necklaces lying across the dark roofs.



They were flying very fast. Tim's hands felt cold, as they gripped the broomstick. Tobias stood at the end, his long tail flying out behind him in the wind.

Before long, they came to the end of the houses. Tim saw the canal still below them, running across the dark countryside.

They were coming down.



Soon they were flying just over the tree-tops, and Tim saw a house ahead of them. It was a little house, standing by itself near a wood. One window was lit up, and shone in the dark.

The broomstick came down at the gate. Tim didn't fall over this time. He jumped off when Tobias did.

Tobias tied the broomstick to the gate-post, and they went towards the door.



“Where are we?” whispered Tim.

“At the house of a safe witch,” said Tobias.

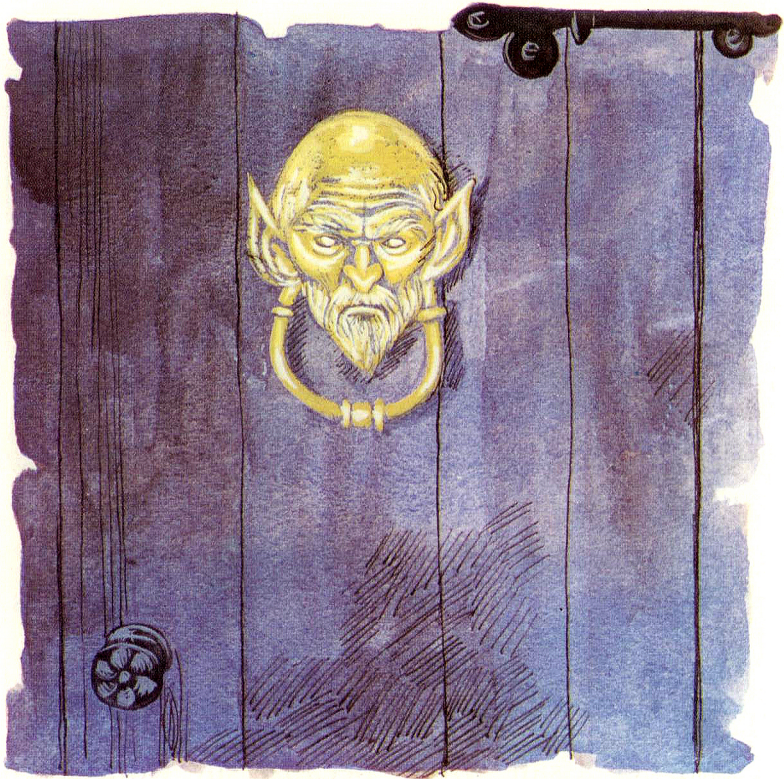
“What is a safe witch?” whispered Tim.

“You might call her a good witch,” said Tobias softly. “And then again, you might not. I call her a safe witch, because she won’t turn you into a mouse or a toad. That’s what a wild witch would do. Keep away from wild witches. A safe witch will help you, if she feels like it. Knock three times on the door.”

“Are you sure she’s a safe witch?” asked Tim.

Tobias laughed, and Tim saw his tail twitch and his eyes shine.

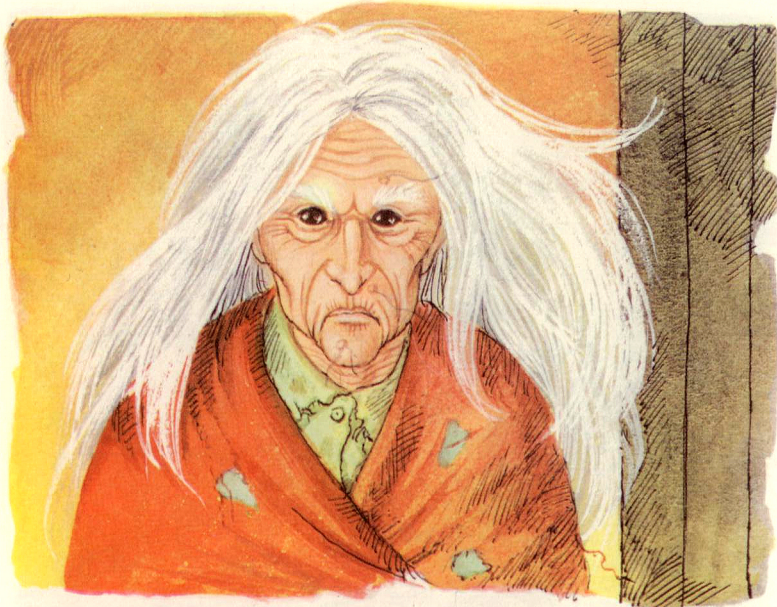
“You can never be sure with witches,” he said. “Knock three times.”



There was a strange brass knocker on the door. It was the face of an old man with pointed ears and a pointed beard.

Tim put out his hand to lift it. But the old man's eyes seemed to be looking at him in a very unfriendly way. Tim didn't like it at all.

He picked up a stone, and banged on the door three times.



The door opened so quickly that Tim was sure someone had been just on the other side of it, listening.

A little old woman stood in the doorway. She had long white hair, and dark black eyes. She wore a ragged red shawl over a pale green dress. The dress wasn't very clean, and there were holes in it, too. She was a thin little woman, with two or three long whiskers on her face.

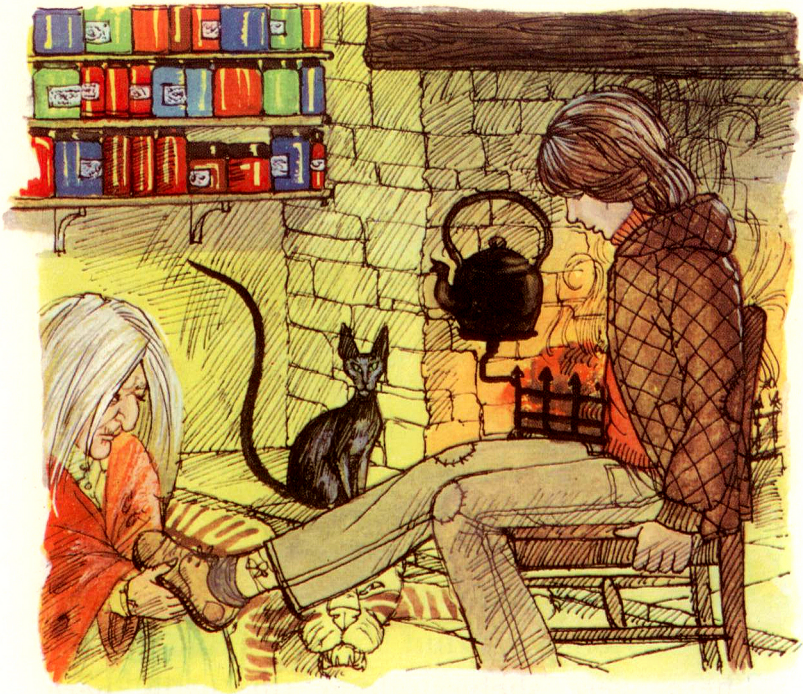
She stood there, saying nothing.

Tobias ran into the house. The old woman stepped to one side, and Tim followed him slowly.



A black kettle was singing on an open fire, and the firelight lit the room. There were two wooden chairs by the fire, and a rug in front of it. Tim saw nothing but the rug, and he jumped back.

The rug was a tiger-skin, and the tiger's head was towards him. Its mouth was open, and its eyes shone in the fire-light as if alive.



The old woman said nothing.

Tobias ran forward, and sat down by the fire. But Tim saw that even Tobias was careful not to sit on the rug. Tim hopped forward and sat down in one of the chairs.

The old woman bent down and took Tim's foot in her hand. She seemed to know why they were there without being told.

It was all Tim could do to let her feel his foot.

She muttered to herself, put his foot down, and went to the side of the room.



There were shelves along the wall there, and Tim could see that they were full of bottles. The bottles shone in the firelight, red and blue and green.

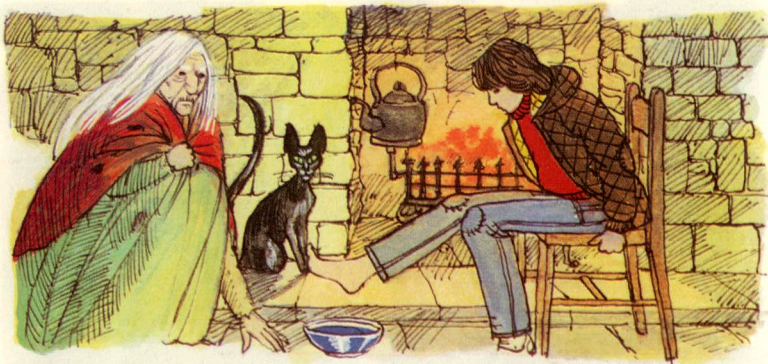
The old woman took a blue bottle from the shelf, and poured something out into a glass bowl.

She put the bottle down.

She set the bowl on the ground by the chair.

She took Tim's foot in her hand again, and took off his sock and the bandage.

She set his foot in the bowl.



Whatever the old woman had put in the bowl was very cold. Tim pulled his foot out quickly.

The old woman muttered something to herself, and nodded.

Tim pulled on his sock, and put his foot on the ground. It didn't hurt any more.

"Thank you," he said.

The old woman gave Tim a long, long look. Then she turned to Tobias.

"You can't take the boy with you tonight, Tobias," she said. She spoke slowly, and she sounded a little like the branches of the old tree, creaking in the wind. "There will be a storm later, and the wild ones are out."

"Where are they?" asked Tobias. He seemed very excited.

"On the other side of the wood," said the old woman.



Tobias' eyes shone green.

"I must have a quick look," he said. "Wait here, Tim."

Before Tim could say anything, Tobias had run past him and out of the door.

"Don't go, Tobias! Wait for me!" shouted Tim, jumping to his feet and running after him.

He was too late. The broomstick flew up as he ran out into the wind. He tore across to the gate, but the broomstick was high up and flying towards the wood, with Tobias standing on the end.

Dark clouds were blowing up over the wood, hiding the stars.



Tim turned, and saw the old woman standing behind him. He suddenly remembered his foot. It didn't hurt at all.

"What shall I do now?" he asked. He didn't want to go back into the house. He didn't like that knocker, and he didn't like the tiger-skin. The old woman seemed to know what he was thinking.

"Wait here, if you like," she said.



Just at that moment a man came down the road on a bicycle, riding towards the wood. He was riding from one side of the road to the other, and singing to himself as he rode along.

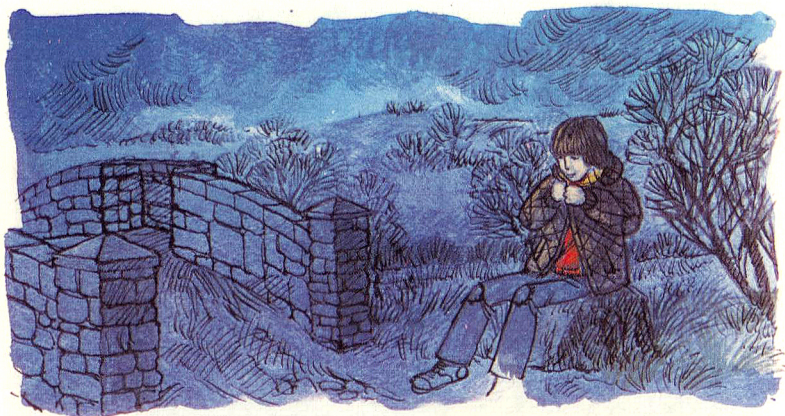
The old woman watched him go by.

“He won’t get very far,” she said.

“What – what do you mean?” asked Tim.

“The wild witches will be after him,” said the old woman slowly. *“You’d better go, Tim. They’ll be here soon. Go down the path to the canal. Cross over the bridge. You’ll be safer there. Witches can’t cross running water.”*

She turned, and went back to the house. The door shut behind her.



Tim stood for a moment in the dark outside.

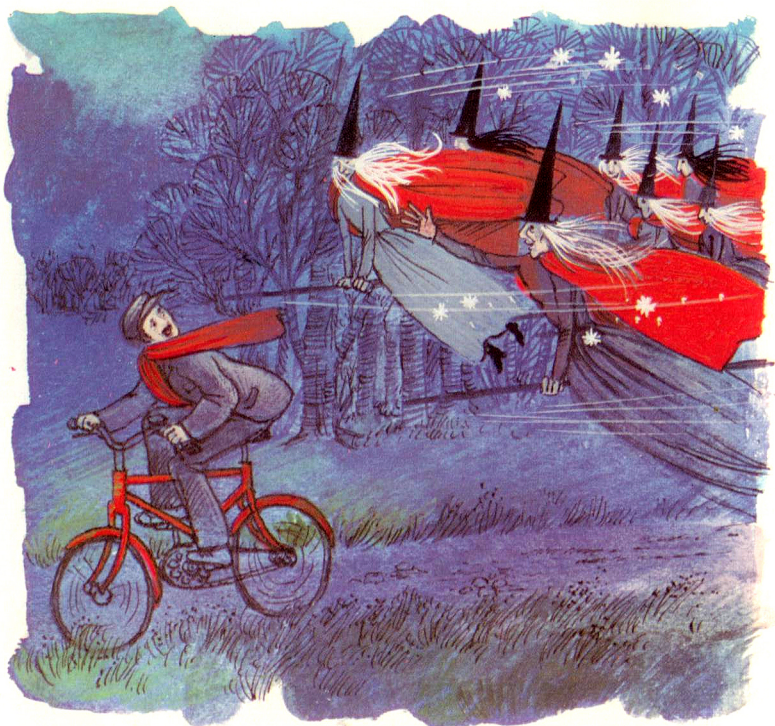
The path ran down from the road, past the house, and on over the canal. He went slowly along it, and came to the water. There was a bridge, just as the old woman had said.

Tim went over the bridge and sat down on a stone on the far side.

"I'll wait for a bit, and see if Tobias comes back," he said to himself. He pulled his coat round him and shivered.

He hadn't long to wait.

There was a strange whistle from the wood, and then a sudden cry, and the man on the bicycle came flying back down the road. He was pedalling as hard as he could, and he kept looking behind him.



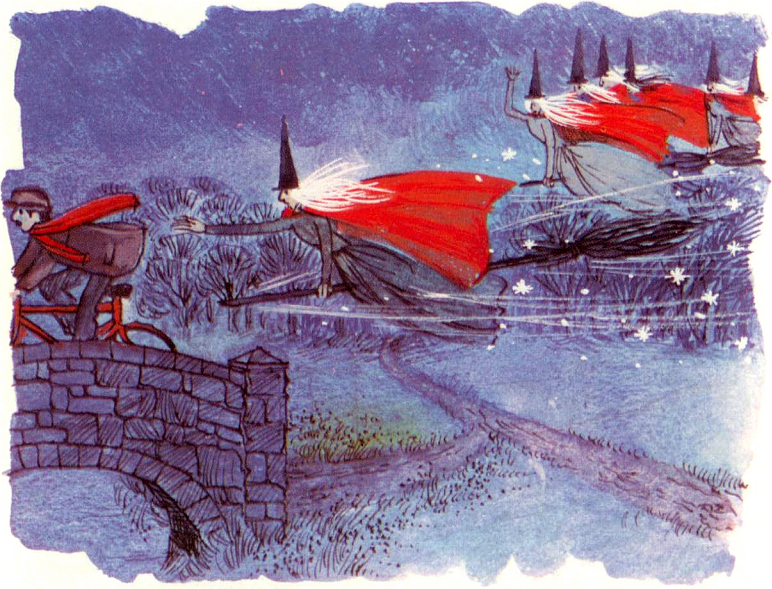
Then Tim saw the witches.

There were seven of them, riding their broomsticks low over the ground.

They had tall black hats, and long red cloaks, and their long hair blew out in the wind.

They were flying faster and faster, and calling and whistling to each other as they flew.

Tim dropped down by the side of the bridge. His knees were shaking.



The witches were very near the man on the bicycle.

He was standing on the pedals now. He swung his bicycle off the main road, and down the path to the bridge.

Just as the first witch bent forward to grab him, the man shot on to the bridge and down the other side.

He didn't see Tim. He didn't see anything but the path in front, and the bridge, and the witches behind him.

The man shot past Tim, and vanished into the darkness, pedalling for his life.



As the witches came to the bridge, one by one they swept up and to one side, as if they had come to a wall.

Higher and higher they went.

Tim could hear them laughing wildly in the wind, as they raced back to the wood.

Then they were gone.



Tim was still shaking when he heard something drop on to the path. He looked up, and saw Tobias.

The broomstick lay on the bridge.

Tobias was laughing. It was a wild laugh. Tobias' tail was waving, and his eyes shone green. His whiskers were twitching, and he was shaking with laughter.

"Did you see the wild witches?" he said. "They nearly had him that time."

"I'm glad he got away," said Tim. "What would they have done to him?"

"Turned him into a toad, perhaps," said Tobias, "or tossed him into the canal. I don't know." He laughed again.

"Let's go home," said Tim.



Tobias twitched his tail.

"Come on, then," he said.

Tim climbed on to the broomstick.

"Do you often see the wild witches?" he asked.

Tobias turned and looked at him. His eyes glowed and he twitched his whiskers.

"How is your foot?" he asked, as if he had not heard what Tim said.

"Better," said Tim.

"I told you she was a safe witch," said Tobias.

Tim remembered the door-knocker and the tiger-skin, and said nothing.



The wind was still blowing, when Tobias left Tim at the window. He didn't come in. As Tim jumped down from the sill, Tobias turned the broomstick around and flew off.

Tim saw him fly over the houses on the other side of The Yard. For a moment he saw Tobias standing on the broomstick, his black tail waving in the wind.

Then he was gone.

Tim climbed slowly into bed. He was thinking hard. He remembered something about witches he had read in a book somewhere, but he couldn't remember where.



As he lay thinking about the book, the storm broke. From time to time, the room was lit up by flashes of lightning. Thunder rolled over the roofs of the town.

Then the rain came. A few big drops blew against the window. Then more and more, until at last the skies opened and the rain came down in sheets.

Tim fell asleep listening to the thunder and the rain.



When Tim woke in the morning, he remembered the book. It was in a pile of old books on the floor in the back attic.

He jumped out of bed, and went to the window. The storm was over. The sky was blue, and the sun was just coming up.

He pushed his feet into his slippers, and went across the little landing to the back attic.



He found the book at once, and took it back to bed. It didn't take him long to find the pages he wanted.

On one side there was a picture of three witches, riding on their broomsticks, with their long hair blowing out in the wind, just as he had seen them the night before. On the other page, there were three verses.

Tim looked at them.



Green eyes glow in the dark,
When cats with witches dwell,
But which cat is a witch cat?
Only a witch can tell.

House brooms sweep.
Witch brooms fly.
But which broom is a witch broom,
To sail across the sky?

Some witches are safe,
Silent and strange and slow.
Some are wicked and wild,
And dance when the storm winds blow.
But which witch is a wild witch?
Only the witches know.



Tim read the page carefully.
Then he read the first verse again:

“Green eyes glow in the dark,
When cats with witches dwell.
But which cat is a witch cat?
Only a witch can tell.”

“I wonder!” he said to himself. “I wonder!”



Flightpath to Reading A5



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